Deviation at Cochiti encourages Silvery Minnow spawning;

Corps and Pueblo team up

By Bruce Hill, Jr. and Kelsey Seeger, USACE Public Affairs

There is hope for the endangered Rio Grande Silvery Minnow that once flourished here in New Mexico and parts of Texas.

Thanks to a water deviation at Cochiti Lake the minnow may now have a greater chance of survival.

Through the primary efforts of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Pueblo de Cochiti, and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BoR), the Silvery Minnow is already having a more productive spawning this year.

"We had an unprecedented deviation of operations at Cochiti Lake, and stored water so we could enhance the flows at the best spawning times for the Silvery Minnow," said Mark Yuska, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Albuquerque District Reservoir Control Branch Chief. The deviation occurred through the cooperation of Pueblo de Cochiti from the suggestion of the Rio Grande Compact States

Photo by Larry Torrez, Cochiti Lake Maintenance Worker

Pictured is the beach area on Memorial Day weekend during the deviation. Restrooms to the extreme right were partially under water. At normal water levels, the restrooms are usually on dry land about 125 yards from the shoreline. Though shelters were under water as well, lake visitors still made use the beach.

The deviation of up to 10,000 acre-feet of New Mexico water began to be stored May 2. Water levels climbed up to seven feet and left some recreational areas like picnic tables, one of the two handicap accessible fishing piers and a swimming beach temporarily closed to the public. The temporary closures were in order for Cochiti to store the extra water for later releases, and in a manner that best mimics the water flows most ideal for spawning.

"Normally when we do flood control it (the water) naturally goes up in the summer when we have high snow pack, so I don't think it (the deviation) will have a big impact on reservoir operations," said Don Gallegos, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Albuquerque District co-planner for the deviation at Cochiti.

The intention of the deviation was to prevent the consequences that the decreased amount of run-off, which this year's run-off having only been 70 percent of what was expected, might have had on the spawning of the Silvery Minnow. The release of the water from the deviation provided the flows necessary to effectively increase the Silvery Minnow population in 2005.

"The whole objective was to provide flows similar to flows that responded well with the spawning," said William R. DeRagon, Albuquerque District Biologist and co-planner for the Cochiti deviation. "We hope to see them respond with a large population increase to further the species conservation in recovery."

The Engineer Advisers of the Rio Grande Compact Commission requested that the Corps implement a deviation at Cochiti. The deviation began in mid April and ended June 15. Throughout the deviation the Corps worked with the BoR, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (FWS), New Mexico Interstate Commission, Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, Rio Chama Acequia Association, and the Native American Pueblos.

The Rio Grande Silvery Minnow (Hybognathus amarus), which historically was considered to be one of the more abundant and widespread fishes in the Rio Grande basin, was listed as an endangered species in 1994 by the FWS. The Silvery Minnow achieved this status due to the consequences of polluted water from municipal, industrial, and agricultural sources, competition and predation from non-native fish in the Rio Grande River, dewatering, and regulation of water flow for irrigation.

In an Environmental Assessment report completed by the Corps in April regarding the possible consequences the deviation at Cochiti might have on the Silvery Minnow, the fish now only occupy a 160 mile reach from Cochiti Dam to the headwaters of Elephant Butte Reservoir. In the same report, the Silvery Minnow is present in only five percent of its historical range, having previously extended as far south as Texas and more north of Cochiti.

Pueblo de Cochiti, which owns a large portion of the Cochiti area, reconciled with the Corps in 2001 after claims that Cochiti Dam, completed by the Corps in 1975, destroyed land and cultural resources significant . . .

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to their heritage. The corps began mending that relationship which has led to a collaborative effort between Pueblo de Cochiti and the corps, helping facilitate and support the deviation at Cochiti Dam.

"The primary goal of the Pueblo is to protect against any further adverse impact," said Jacob Pecos, Director of the Natural Resources and Conservation Department for Pueblo de Cochiti.

"We are proud of our relationship with the Corps of Engineers. The Pueblo and the Corps have come to appreciate the complexities of our respective responsibilities. The evolving issues compel us to look at ways that we are able to strengthen our collective ability to be effective water resource managers, utilizing the Reservoir or face the difficult political challenges that can be as divisive in our relationship that has taken nearly three decades to resolve," he said.

"Lt. Colonel Estok, along with very effective key staff, exemplified true government to government interaction throughout this process," said Pecos. "This particular deviation was discussed among corps and pueblo leadership as a joint decision. The pueblo's particular interest is defining any adverse impacts to its land and cultural resources."

The corps relationship with the Pueblo de Cochiti was strained for many years," said Dr. Ron Kneebone, PhD, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Albuquerque District Tribal Liaison. "That was until Lieutenant Colonel Midkiff, (Commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Albuquerque District from 2000 to 2002), changed the manner in which the corps did business with the pueblos, and the corps began to seek the pueblos input on projects that affected them and their implementation as well as treating them as equal partners."

The deviation would not have been possible six years ago, said Kneebone. "The Corps relationship began to improve once the Corps initiated formal monthly meetings. Now some individuals interact as frequently as daily. Our teamwork has produced a feeling of trust and has in turn produced a better functioning team," he said.

"Pueblo de Cochiti's participation in the deviation with the Corps is meant to encourage the pueblo and the corps to be effective water resource managers of the Cochiti Reservoir, and avoid the past mistakes like the desecration of revered sacred and seepage issues that strained the Pueblo's relationship with the Corps for over thirty years," said Pecos.

"The importance of having the support and input of the Native American tribes is important and necessary for the Corps," said U.S. Senator Pete Domenici, Chairman of the Senate Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee in a June news release.

Currently, U.S. Senators Pete Domenici and Jeff Bingaman are trying to add a provision to the Water Resources and Development Act (WRDA) that will allow federal employees greater ability to interact with Indian tribes in regard to civil works and other programs.

"With New Mexico's tenuous water situation, it's necessary that Federal officials in the state have the authorization to work with Indian tribes to efficiently and effectively maintain important civil works programs," said Senator Domenici.

"This provision will make it possible for the federal government to work directly with pueblos in our state on key habitat restoration projects and water operations, which will help improve the overall condition of the Middle Rio Grande," said Sen. Bingaman.